

ROOKIE

R01

3 steps to RPG HEAVEN



So You've Never Played An RPG?

Role-Playing Games make for a popular and rewarding hobby and are played by thousands of people all over the world. Since their creation in the 1970s, such games have grown from simple beginnings as a small scale offshoot of fantasy wargaming to a major entertainment genre with a massive influence on the worlds of video gaming and cinema. For those first looking to try their hand at such a game there are a number of factors which might put them off but the truth of the matter is that role-playing is an exciting and highly social hobby which rewards all levels of play. In this document I want to try and explain some of the appeal of these games and give some advice which may help new players to settle comfortably into the hobby.

At its heart, role-playing is a form of cooperative storytelling which takes place in a game-play environment. Each player takes control of a single character within the story, one of the chief protagonists, and controls that character's actions throughout the game. Dice are commonly, though not exclusively, used to determine the outcome of events and various problems and opponents will need to be overcome during the course of the story. Anyone who has ever played *cowboys & indians* or *cops & robbers*, whether as a child themselves or while entertaining a child, has essentially played a role-playing game without the benefit of the rules framework that exists in hobby games to keep things fair and balanced.

You may have some experience of "Computer RPGS" such as the *Elder Scrolls™*, *Divinity™*, *Witcher™* or *Dragon Age™* series. These games are inspired by the tabletop games which we are discussing here and can provide a useful background when learning how to role-play. Unfortunately these games, thanks to the limitations of even modern computers, have a tendency to focus on the mechanical aspects of RPGs rather than the role-playing aspects. While this is not wrong - the mechanics are as much a part of an RPG as the pure role-play is - it does show only one side of the hobby and leaves the players unfamiliar with large portions of the experience which might be available to them in a tabletop game.

What's It All About (Alfie)?

To know how you "should"* play an RPG you first need to know what these games are all about. Although we touched on it in the opening column, let's go into it in a little more detail now by looking at a couple of representative games with a different feel...

Dungeons & Dragons™ was the first RPG and set the template for how the hobby would develop. It is a fantasy game, originally taking its cues from writers such as *JRR Tolkien* and *Jack Vance* and now equally influenced by more modern authors like *George RR Martin*. Many writers, perhaps most notable *RA Salvatore* and *Ed Greenwood* have written books specifically inspired by D&D™ and using "official" game worlds for their settings.

A D&D™ game is often one of the more mechanically orientated games, with the fighting of monsters proving the simplest way to acquire *experience†*, treasure and kudos. A "typical" D&D™ game involves a building or area to explore, monsters to fight and treasure to be won as a result. Usually there will be some laudable motivation for these actions, such as the defeat of an evil necromancer or the rescue of a kidnapped princess. D&D™ *adventurers* can be viewed as the *FBI Hostage Rescue Team* or *Delta Force* of the fantasy gaming world. They are given missions, commonly called *quests* in this context, by local authorities and are rewarded financially and cathartically for their "good deeds".

Since combat is often an important part of these sorts of games, they often use maps and miniatures to graphically represent the action. Much of the action involves dealing with the environment, such as traps or puzzles, and monsters, such as wolves or goblins, rather than dealing with "people". Social interactions certainly do occur but are commonly with quest-givers or merchants and are not a key element of the game.

While D&D™ is the oldest and best known of these style of games it is far from the only one. Over the years many Fantasy RPGS have followed this action-orientated pattern and there are fans to be found for each such game.

* Anybody who tells you are "doing it wrong" or who tells you any absolute Dos & Don'ts with regards role-playing isn't worth listening to. There are things which might work better and things which you might be discouraged from but there really are no right and wrong ways to play.

† More about experience in R02, for now you should just accept that its a big deal in these games.

Great Gaming Misconceptions

Role-playing, as a hobby, is beset by numerous misconceptions - some of them held by those outside the hobby and some by the players themselves. These sidebar boxes will present you with a few of these misconceptions and provide you with the truth of the matter.

Call Of Cthulhu™ is a classic horror-themed RPG inspired by the works of *HP Lovecraft*. Although commonly viewed as a horror game, CoC™ should really be seen as an investigation game. The mechanics and principles of such a game are as suited to reproduced TV shows such as *CSI*, *Castle* or *Sherlock* as they are to emulating Lovecraft's books.

In these types of games the focus is on interpersonal interaction - on talking to people. Investigations look in two places for their clues: the physical environment, including forensic evidence and library or internet research; and witness interviews, including eye-witnesses, experts and character references. The player's characters will gather as much information as possible from such sources until it leads them to a final conclusion, whether that be a criminal to be investigated or a supernatural menace to be negated.

Miniatures and other graphic representations are rarely used in these games, with the possible exception of maps* or "Player Handouts" - documents allowing the players to personally interact with discovered clues such as newspaper cuttings or encoded documents. Such games may well contain action scenes such as chases or struggles with killers, monsters and ghosts. These scenes provide a change of pace, breaking up the more cerebral activity, and can be used to provide for a dramatic and exciting conclusion to the adventure.

While a game like CoC™ is concerned primarily with these investigative scenarios, such scenes or entire adventures can be used for a change of pace in any RPG and so games such as *Dungeons & Dragons™*, *Shadowrun™* or *Mutants & Masterminds™* might all involve scenes where the players investigate the target or location of their next action-orientated scene.

As one last item of note, the *Cthulhu Mythos* has spawned a variety of different games and has also proved an influence on many other games over the years, providing an example of the way in which ideas can cross between genres and games.

* Particularly of crime scenes.

How To Get Started In Gaming

One of the things which can put off a potential new gamer is the sheer quantity of material available for any game. A new player walking into their *Friendly Local Game Store* is confronted by shelf upon shelf of books, many of them for the same game and may also overhear experienced players talking about their latest exploits. While all of these things can be fascinating they can also be intimidating and such a new player may not have any clue where to begin their gaming career.

Where you should begin depends upon what it is that you actually want to do. If you like the sound of playing a particular game, such as **D&D™**, and want to give it a try then your options are simple: buy a starter set or find an existing group who will accept a new player. If you are looking for a new hobby but don't have a particular game in mind then you will need to look for something which appeals - or at least which is locally available. Anyone looking to start role-playing should probably ask themselves the following questions...

"Why do I want to play?"

Different people play role-playing games for different reasons but the one thing that all RPGs have in common is enjoyment. We play to have fun. If you are a competitive sort and are looking to impose your superiority on other players then this may not be the hobby for you. There are plenty of modern and traditional board and card games that might be better.

Great Gaming Misconceptions

"Gamers are all geeks with no friends." This is one of my favourites - a nonsensical idea when applied a hobby involving spending several hours each week enjoying the company of several friends while engaging in a co-operative activity wherein they work towards a communal goal. Each group has their own traditions and behaviours, often involving meals (or at least pizza), drinks and joint activities outside the game.

"Girls don't play RPGS." Another one I can't agree with. For years I played in a group where there were more female players than male and even, at one point, found myself the only man in the game. Many a gaming group includes couples who play together and some of the best players I have met have been of the female persuasion.

“What am I looking for from this?”

RPGs simulate entire worlds and, as such, can provide an almost unlimited variety of game play. While certain games are better suited to certain play styles of activities, what really shapes game play is the players you are with. If you want political manoeuvring and high finance then a group of players who are interested in slaying bigger and better monsters will not provide the right game for you. It is rare to find exactly the game you want but a good group will work to accommodate everyone* as best they can.

“When and how often can I play?”

Modern life tends to put a lot of obstacles in the way of regular gaming and most games require a consistent attendance. Finding a group which meets at times which you can make, or which is willing to reschedule regularly to fit the players availability, is important. Of course, we’re talking about an ideal situation here. The chances are that you will need to compromise based on what is available to you.

“What do I bring to the table?”

It is important to realise that this question is not about whether you are worthy to play but rather is about knowing what you are good at. Some people may be able to do complex sums in their head but not spell simple words; others may be able to predict human behaviour very well but not come up with combat strategies. Failure is not much fun so if a particular game or group commonly focuses on a field of endeavour which you have little talent for then you should probably try a different one.

“Do I actually want to spend time with these guys?”

Sensitive subject though it is, this is an important one. An “average”† game session lasts about four hours and most groups play from one to four times in a fortnight. That’s quite a bit of time to spend with people you don’t like so you need to find a group of players who you can get on with. They don’t have to be your best buddies but if you start getting irritated with a fellow player within the first couple of sessions then the situation is likely to just get worse. You need to be able to feel comfortable with your fellow players in order to get the most out of your gaming experience. On this one, you probably shouldn’t compromise.

* At least within reason.

† Not that there really is such a thing as an average session but you know what we mean.

Great Gaming Misconceptions

“The Game System is all important.” Some players focus a great deal on what specific game, such as *D&D™* or *Runequest™* is being used for the game. The truth is that it is the interactions of the players and Gamesmaster which shapes the gaming experience and the so finding the right group is far more important than finding the right game.

Finding An Existing Game.

The best way to learn anything is from someone who already knows it and role-playing is no different. While it is entirely possible to learn how to play from what is written in the rulebooks‡, you will pick up the game and the hobby quicker if you play with experienced gamers. If you have a local game store this is not too difficult, groups in need of players will probably advertise in store and there may even be games happening in the store itself which you can watch or join in order to get some experience. There may also be a local games club which you can join in search of players, especially in college or university towns. Just going along to a club or store will generally find you someone you can talk to - gamers are a gregarious bunch - and they may well be able to introduce to you someone who is in need of new players.

If you are not lucky enough to easily find a game then it may be worth advertising in local shops§ or cafes, or even places like libraries where gamers might be found. You can also look online, on sites like gamerseekinggamer.com or obsidianportal.com for games in your area. Social networking is also a good option, as is the official website of a particular game you want to play - sites like paizo.com and dnd.wizards.com.

Another option is to look for an entirely online game. A virtual tabletop like Fantasy Grounds or Roll20 will allow you to play with people far from your own location and can be a good starting point if you cannot find a local game. The community portions of the websites for such virtual tabletops will generally have a “Looking for Group” and/or “Looking for Players” section which you can post on and read.

‡ Not to mention all the gaming videos and live streams which can be found on sites like YouTube and Twitch.

§ Any shop which sells games, whether RPGs, board games, card games or even video games, is suitable. You can also try comic shops, book shops and video stores.

Great Gaming Misconceptions

“If I try and run a game for players who are more experienced than me then I will just end up looking stupid.” While this kind of worry is entirely understandable, it is not strictly correct. It is the more experienced players who will appreciate that you are doing something intimidating - either because they have done it themselves or because they have never had the nerve to do so - and will appreciate that nobody is born knowing how to run a good game. Your first game may not be a brilliant epic which the players talk about for years but if you relax and concentrate on everyone having a good time then there is a limit to how far wrong you can go. If a game has even one moment where the players laugh out loud, gasp at a revelation or look worried for the fate of their characters then it has achieved one more memorable moment than if you chose to run nothing.

Starting A New Game.

If you still cannot find a game to play in then you can always try starting your own. All the same places I have advised you to look for games can also be used to advertise for players and if you make it clear that you are an inexperienced GM you will normally find that players will go easy on you. In fact, an experienced player or two in your group is useful since they will be able to help you with rules and decision until you get the hang of them for yourself. Some games, such as *D&D™*, *Pathfinder™* or *Call Of Cthulhu™* have starter sets or fast-play scenarios available which are designed specifically for new players* and 3rd party publishers have released “beginner” adventures for every edition of *D&D™* and many other games besides. The best written of these will talk you through your first game and are the next best thing to having an experienced GM sitting next to you while you run it. The author suggests using such scenarios even if you do play for a while before trying your hand at running a game. Even if you cannot find a beginner adventure, using a pre-written scenario for your first game will take the pressure off you. Writing an adventure is not entirely like writing a story and you cannot expect to know how to balance an adventure if you have never played in one. Such knowledge comes only with experience. More about playing your first game will be published in *R02 My First Character* and about running it in *R03 In At The Deep End*.

* Check the reviews of these however, some are better than others.

Just Do It!

Hopefully, this document has proved to be of some use to you and you have decided that you want to give the hobby a try. When all is said and done you can learn to play by playing so whether you join an existing group or settle down with some friends to give it a try you should really just jump in with both feet. Don't take your first game too seriously† and don't worry about making mistakes, just get together with some people whose company you enjoy and have some fun.

To find out more, check out further releases in the **3 Steps To RPG Heaven** range - the Red cover “books” are for Rookies who are just starting out, the Blue ones are for more experienced Gamers and the Black ones are for Masters of the game who just want to polish off the edges a bit‡. If you have any specific questions in the meantime then feel free to email them to questions@obsessiongame.co.uk and I'll do my best to answer them. We also recommend that you check out roleplayingtips.com for further help.

Credits

Written and published by **Gavin L G Steele**

With help from the members of **HinT**

Cover Art by **Gavin L G Steele**

Layout by **Gavin L G Steele**

Proof-reading by **Linda M Evans**

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† Actually, don't take ANY game too seriously. Get wrapped up in the game world and the story by all means, but know when to put it down and get back to real life.

‡ This colour scheme is shamelessly stolen from the Frank Mentzer edition of *Dungeons & Dragons™* released in the early '80s. This wonderful game, which started the author along this path many years ago, is available once again in PDF form from DnDClassics.com.